

Thomas Nast's influence on American's didn't stop with his Christmas drawings. His engravings chronicled the American scene from the Civil War period to the turn of the century. They highlighted every major national event and issue, the political process, elections, and scandal in the government. The American scene was ripe in subject matter for Nast. The country was fast becoming an industrial nation; railroads were spreading, factories were being built, and cities were fast becoming crowded with immigrants that supplied cheap labor. Scandal was everywhere. Elections were being rigged. One of his most famous political cartoon attacks was aimed at Boss Tweed.

Boss Tweed was actually William Marcy Tweed. Tweed and his ring ruled New York's Tammany Hall for years and managed to divert hundreds of millions of dollars from the city to their pockets. The series of cartoons exposing the Tweed ring was Nast's initial campaign against corruption in government. Nast played hard ball and wasn't afraid to make direct accusations. The public outcry became unbearable, Mr. Tweed is quoted as telling Nast at one point that "Let's stop those damned pictures. I don't care so much what the papers write about me -- my constituants can't read, but damn it, they can see pictures." A little over a year of his campaign against Tweed is all it took to put a stop to Tweed, get him arrested, and behind bars.

The little-known side of Thomas Nast is that he could not read or write. This left him with a major handicap. This didn't stop him however. His constant thirst for knowledge found a means to learn. Initially, he had his wife read to him while he did his drawings and engravings. As him income increased, he hired scholars to read to him from science, physics, history, Shakespeare, Dickens, Mark Twain, and so forth. It is from these readings that he gained his knowledge -- and inspiration -- for many of his engravings.

Thomas Nast moved on to become a strong influence in politics through his cartoons and engravings. Columbia, the symbol of America, was created by Nast. In addition, he created the concept of the Republican elephant and Democratic donkey. He also had a hand in how Uncle Sam looks today.

In addition to establishing many of America's political symbols, Nast also publicly supported -- and opposed -- certain candidates for the office of President of the United States. In the campaign of 1872 Nast's cartoons in Harper's Weekly helped to bring about the defeat or Horace Greeley. Greeley had been nominated to run against Ulysses Simpson Grant. The election of 1876 saw Nast support Rutherford B. Hayes. With each successive presidential campaign, Nast picked a candidate to support and produced cartoons and engravings in support of the candidates political platform. In seven presidential elections he never picked a loser.